

COMPARATIVE LITERATURE IN CANADA:

A TESTIMONY FROM BELOW

Andrea C. Valente

York University

These impressions here are those of a junior researcher whose gaze comes ‘from below.’ In other words, it is a doctoral student’s autobiographical account of her academic trajectory from Brazil to Canada, and it asks to be understood as an analogy of the current status of Comparative Canadian Literature. 209

When I think back to being a graduate student at a university in the southern hemisphere, some ambiguous feelings in regard to Comparative Literature arise. In some Brazilian universities during the military regime, the discipline was seen as an alien object wrapped up in nationalistic ‘green and yellow’ tones¹ under the direction of a literature science department. As the Brazilian comparatist Antonio Candido noted early on, Comparative Literature and Brazilian Literature shared a symbiotic relation under the discourse of identity and nationalism. For this reason, I was not keen on its colors and decided instead to take a Master’s interdisciplinary program in Applied Linguistics and Literature at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ). This was housed in an English-German Department (*Departamento de Letras Anglo-Germânicas*), in which English-language competence was an important, non-negotiable requirement for admission into the program. In contrast, the modern language requirements for the Comparative Literature program were not as evident, and the program was, consequently, strongly monolingual, attracting mostly graduate students willing to work in the country’s national language (Portuguese) on its canonical texts. In the mid-1990s, the graduate programs in the Faculty of Letters faced some internal competition when a cutting-edge Master’s program in Interdisciplinary Studies in Applied Linguistics was launched with faculty members who had recently received PhDs from humanities programs in northern universities, such as Birmingham, Warwick, Toronto and UCLA. As a consequence, the new program rapidly outgrew the more established graduate studies, such as Comparative

Literature.

When I was in the second year of my Master's, one of my professors started a partnership with an international research group in literature, and a guest professor from Germany was invited to carry out an empirical comparative study of literature. I was assigned to work as his research assistant. It turned out to be my first formal research in Comparative Literature and ended up being a very fruitful practice working across Brazilian and German literatures. However, at that time, I was not conscious of its comparative essence, since my graduate program was under the influence of the buzzword "interdisciplinary research," a trend that laid set the groundwork for the coming millennium. For this reason, the term 'comparative studies' was missing from my personal glossary.

210 By not using the term 'Comparative Literature' in my papers, presentations and documents (i.e. curriculum vitae), I was inadvertently creating gaps in my academic narrative, something which caused me to suffer consequences later on. As long as the comparative aspect of my research background from Brazil remained invisible in my academic narrative, my discourse remained restricted to terms such as 'empirical' and 'literary science.' Failing to localize my research projects in the field of Comparative Literature Studies, I missed out on academic opportunities after settling in Canada. It seemed that my CV was unable to translate my former graduate studies into 'Canadian academic experience,' hindering my admission to doctoral programs in Canadian universities. Thus a long and winding path back to graduate school was ahead of me through an intricate maze from which it was hard to find an exit. Only when I took a course with Professor Joseph Pivato in Comparative Canadian Literature at Athabasca University to 'upgrade' my studies did I become aware of the voids in my CV. Eventually I found a way out that led me to the Graduate Program in Humanities at York University.

How can this autobiographical narrative intersect with the trajectory of Comparative Literature in Canada in regards to the challenges that have been imposed on both? There are at least three issues that decelerated my path towards graduate studies after my move to Canada: *translation*, *(in)-visibility* and *canon*, three elements, not coincidentally, that have been crucial to the establishment and development of Comparative Literature as a field in Canada. Scholars such as Bassnett, Corngold and Apter have already remarked that translation occupies a key position in debates to define the existence and borders of Comparative Literature as a discipline (Boldrini 2010). Yet, for some comparatists, the privileged status that translation occupies in Comparative Studies needs to be revised, as D'Hulst suggests in his article "Comparative Literature vs. Translation Studies: Close Encounters of the Third Kind?" (2007). Here the emphasis is on a top-down perspective, in which work with original texts rather than with translations grants a higher quality and methodological rigour to the research, and it goes hand in hand with the elitist expectation, common in academia in the northern hemisphere, that comparatists should know at least three languages. A bottom-up approach, in contrast, brings

pedagogical perspectives to the practice of Comparative Literature in the classroom. In this view, the expectations that undergraduate or even Master's students equally share a common knowledge of a foreign language may be unrealistic, even in a country like Canada, which is well known for its multiculturalism policy. Therefore, for pedagogical practicalities, a translated text is engaged in the classroom as an essential tool to bridge the familiar with the alien. Moreover, the inclusion of *Weltliteratur* in Comparative Literature classrooms becomes more realistic when taught with the assistance of translation, which increases the possibilities of working with more than two foreign literary texts.

Analogously, the *invisibility* of Comparative Literature in Canadian universities might hinder students' access to or even knowledge of its existence in university programs. The segmented structure found in most Canadian universities with their diplomas, programs and departments contributes to this nebulous visibility. In most cases, Comparative Literature studies become merely an appendix of another major program such as English or French. Also, the dialectical forces of amalgamation and separation that take place during the reorganization of a university department can affect its faculty. As Blodgett observed (318), this is a tendency that leads to dispersion and fragmentation as part of postmodern discourse. The appendix feature can also affect students, who might miss a 'hyperlink' to a course in Comparative Literature from a website in a program in the Faculty of Arts. Indeed, without a sophisticated form of GPS to locate Comparative Literature in Canadian universities, desperate students question its fate through various student forums: "Does anyone know what is going on with the Comparative Literature dep't at the University of British Columbia?" ("UBC Comparative Literature").

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My expectations of finding a graduate program in Canada that would welcome non-canonical and accented texts ran low as I navigated through Modern Language departments' websites. The clear-cut programs with language specificities (e.g. English, Spanish, French) were usually combined with monolingual literatures unable to match my transnational and interdisciplinary background whereas pursuing research in a Comparative Literature program allows for pluralities, as it holds a jurisdiction over accented writings as seen in the examples of immigrant/ethnic minority literatures in Canada. In this sense, Ethnic Minority Literature studies have found a safe space in Comparative Literature in Canadian universities.

Wrapping up, I would like to note that the 21st century has brought new challenges for Comparative Literature with the convergence of media such as films, plays, and digital humanities. Hence, the 'literature of the other,' which used to refer to Minor Literature, has been replaced by Media in a paradigmatic way. Not free from criticism, Comparative Literature faces controversial debates on incorporating old and new media into its studies. With the proliferation of film adaptations and the emergence of new media that create more space for studies of intertextualities and paratexts, Comparative Literature in Canada should widen its borders and become more inclusive. For this reason, my bet is that Comparative Literature in Canada and

elsewhere really means convergence studies that should “act transmedially” (Ingram 3). As a result, a broader scope for Comparative Literature should be reconsidered so that comparatists can move into transdisciplinary and not just interdisciplinary work.

With the advances of Digital Humanities in the new millennium, Comparative Literature in Canada once again faces the challenging task of reinventing itself, for, as Blodgett remarks, Comparative Literature in Canada is a “field constantly in search of itself” (315).

NOTE

1. The two official colours of the Brazilian national flag.

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